



MARY LOU DICKERSON

State Representative • 36th Legislative District



Committees

Vice Chair, House
Democratic Caucus
Corrections
Finance
Children &
Family Services

District Office

2208 NW Market # 310A
Seattle, WA 98107
(206) 545-6513

Toll-free Legislative Hotline

1-800-562-6000

TDD (for hearing impaired)

1-800-635-9993

E-mail

dickerso_ma@leg.wa.gov

The Legislature's Internet Home Page

<http://leginfo.leg.wa.gov>

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1997 POST-SESSION REPORT

Dear Neighbor:

In the final analysis, what will the history of the 1997 legislative session reflect? I feel that missed opportunities will be the overriding theme.

The majority rejected our priorities for:

- Meaningful property tax cuts
- A commitment to stay the course on education reform
- Expanding health-care coverage for low-income working families
- Affordable higher education for those families which need it most
- Improvements to the transportation infrastructure
- Retraining for displaced workers

I was left wondering, "What might have been..." Fortunately, we stopped several extremist bills, aligning ourselves with moderate Republicans. We also made gains with a major policy initiative **reforming juvenile justice**. I led the Democratic effort on this reform and was proud that the bill held juveniles more accountable for their crimes while at the same time providing the help they need to stay out of trouble.

It is an honor to serve as your representative.

Mary Lou Dickerson
State Representative
36th District

Juvenile Justice

The Legislature passed landmark legislation reforming juvenile justice laws, an effort initiated by Democrats. As lead House Democratic negotiator for the final bill, I was pleased with the Juvenile Justice Act of 1997 which enhances public safety and emphasizes early intervention for delinquent youth.

The bill offers the first comprehensive reform of Washington's juvenile justice laws in 20 years. We sought a realistic approach to juvenile crime that would deter future problems, instead of just sending a "get tough" message.

The bill creates greater accountability for youthful offenders and gives judges more discretion in sentencing. We recognize that adult prisons are not always the best way to rehabilitate youthful offenders. (Studies show that juveniles sent to adult prisons may become more likely to re-offend.) Since judges are in the best position to consider past criminal history, they must be given latitude to exercise judgment. It sets up a new, simplified sentencing grid.

Under terms of the bill, approximately 155 more juvenile offenders will be tried in adult court each year. That figure represents a compromise from Republicans who wanted 400 additional juveniles automatically sent to adult court each year.

The bill is not just punitive. It emphasizes drug and alcohol services when a youth first gets into trouble with the law, instead of waiting until he or she has a serious offense. It's estimated that in many communities as many as 80 percent of juveniles who come before court have serious drug and alcohol problems. The bill requires parents to become more involved in the court process. It also provides community-based programs that emphasize youth accountability, including a volunteer mentoring program pilot project.

Child Rape

I successfully sponsored a bill cracking down on adult men who impregnate underage teen girls. There is an epidemic of sexual relations between adult men and young teenagers resulting in chaos in relationships, poverty for women and children and uncollected child support. Many of the men are respected, married and have other children. They are rarely prosecuted.

Statistics indicate that two-thirds of births among unwed teens are fathered by adult men. Thirty percent are fathered by men at least six years older than the teen. SHB 1383 stipulates that if the offender is convicted of statutory rape and the child victim becomes pregnant, the court must include in its restitution order all



Gov. Gary Locke signs the Juvenile Justice Act of 1997 as Sen. Jeanine Long (l) and Rep. Mary Lou Dickerson (r) look on.

of the victim's medical expenses, costs of the pregnancy and child support. The court may impose an exceptional sentence if the child victim of rape becomes pregnant as a result of the rape.

K-12 Education

Education continues to be the state's number one priority. The state will spend more money on education next year, but inflation and other variables will more than offset gains. When a 2.4% inflation rate is factored in, Washington will actually spend **less** per student. Statewide, per-pupil spending will actually go down \$70 next year.

The bottom line is that Seattle schoolchildren will have less dollars and more crowded classrooms at the same time that higher academic standards are expected to be met. It could have been worse.

Early legislative plans proposed deeper education cuts. At the insistence of Democratic lawmakers and the Governor, cuts were softened. Complex needs funding was kept at its current level (\$2.3 million for Seattle schools). Half of the proposed cuts to magnet schools were restored (resulting in Seattle schools receiving \$620,000 less next year, instead of \$1.2 million less).

Higher Education

Governor Locke often cites education, including higher education, as "the great equalizer." Following this emphasis, the Legislature agreed to:

- Boost college enrollment by 6,400 students in preparation for the baby boom "echo" which will bring 84,000 more college applicants in the next 15 years.
- Increase student financial aid by \$30 million.
- Implement a prepaid college tuition program, enabling parents to pay for a future college education at today's prices.

- Approve \$546 million for higher education construction projects, including improved branch campuses.
- Approve a 3% salary raise for college professors.
- Approve a special \$4 million fund to recruit and retain faculty.

Unfortunately, the Legislature cut workforce training at community and technical colleges. Those cuts mean retraining for 1,000 fewer students or inadequate financial aid.

Taxes

The 1997 Legislature missed an opportunity for meaningful property tax relief to working families. Property taxes have been rising across the country as assessed values escalate. Washington ranks 21st in the country for the amount of state and local property tax. In 1996, the Legislature granted homeowners a one-time only 4.7 percent cut in the state portion of the property tax. That resulted in homeowners getting roughly \$17 in reduced taxes.

This year, Democrats argued for a deeper cut in taxes to homeowners, pointing out that businesses have been the primary beneficiary of tax cuts in the last two years (92% of \$1 billion in tax cuts). If the Democratic proposal would have become law, homeowners would have received a tax cut of \$205. On the other hand, Republicans argued for a continuation of the 1996 4.7% across-the-board cut for both homeowners and businesses.

With both sides unable to come to agreement, Governor Locke asked lawmakers to approve a one-year extension of the 4.7% state property tax cut, pending further legislative discussions for 1998 tax relief. Lawmakers did not reach a consensus and voters will ultimately decide whether the 4.7% state property tax cut should be permanent.

Another tax relief measure was ESSB 5286, which exempted businesses from paying taxes

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on “intangible property” such as goodwill, reputation, patents and copyrights. Opponents argued that businesses would be under-taxed if assessors were not able to figure “intangible property” into property values. With the passage of ESSB 5286, businesses will not be separately taxed on the value of “intangible property.”

According to the King County Assessor, this legislation may cost individual homeowners an additional \$100 each year, as local government attempts to make up lost revenue. I will be watching the impact of this legislation closely. If taxes are shifted from business onto the backs of homeowners, I will introduce a bill to reverse this legislation.

Labor

In 1997, House and Senate Democrats worked to increase wages, improve job safety and expand job training. I co-sponsored legislation to raise the minimum wage to \$6.50 (Washington’s minimum wage is now the lowest on the West Coast). Republicans refused to even hear this issue.

Two recent State Supreme Court decisions provided that workers can sue employers who knowingly injure the safety of their workers. However, the House came close to passing legislation to reverse these Supreme Court decisions. Fortunately, House Democrats and a few moderate Republicans were able to defeat this legislation.

I fought against efforts to weaken child labor laws. Fortunately, legislation which would have allowed employers to work high school students up to 36 hours a week did not pass.

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REPRESENTATIVE
MARY LOU DICKERSON
305 John L. O'Brien Building
P.O. Box 40600
Olympia, WA 98504-0600
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